

Everybody's Jesus

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John 12:12-36

Let me start my sermon this morning by asking you a question: Who is Jesus for? What kind of people did Jesus come to help? Who was his target audience? Who should really benefit from what he offers? Who was Jesus for?

I had an interesting conversation about that with someone several years back. I was at the student center of a Community College in Dallas, talking to some students about their beliefs and about Christianity. It had been a long morning - not a lot of great conversations. I was getting ready to leave, when a guy came up and sat down at the table and asked me what I was doing. I said "Well, I'm a Seminary Student, and a Christian, and I'm just here answering people's questions about Christianity."

The guy indicated that he was not a Christian and then asked me what I believe. I said "Well, personally, I believe that Jesus was God's son." He said "I believe that too!" I said "I believe that I'm what you would call a sinner - not that I'm the worst guy in the world, but I've definitely done things that are wrong, and I need his forgiveness." He said "I believe that too!" I said "Hmmm - OK. I believe that Jesus never sinned, and that he actually died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins" He said "Me too!" At this point, I'm thinking "Either this guy is really ready to become a Christian or he has started his own cult and is going to move to Waco!" So I finally said "I believe that Jesus rose from the dead, and offers us eternal life." -He said he believed that too. So I said "OK, so you are a Christian." He said "Not at all." Finally, I said "You really believe this, but you're not a Christian? Why not?" He said "I don't want to be. Jesus just isn't for me."

I've got to respect the guy for his honesty, but his comments raise a question: Who exactly is Jesus for? Who did he come to help - to save? It's an interesting question. Over the years, I've seen people conclude that Jesus wasn't for them for various reasons. Some because of their ethnic identity - some because of their social class - many because of their past - and some, because of the kind of people they see following Jesus. Who exactly is Jesus for? It's an important question! Let's be honest. This is our first Church service where we've really invited guests in. If I were visiting a church for the first time, I would be asking myself "Who is this place for?" What kind of people is it really for? Is it for really religious people? People who have their moral lives together? Is it for people of a certain income bracket? A certain ethnicity? Who is Jesus - and who is this church - for?

Today we're going to look at the Bible story that we are celebrating today. The story that Kelley told to the kids - the story of Palm Sunday. Let me invite you, if you have a Bible with you today, to turn to the 12th chapter of John's Gospel. Today we are going to look at John 12. As we look at this story of what is called "Jesus' triumphal entry" or Palm Sunday, we are going to see four facts about Jesus in this passage - four things that Jesus either was or that he did. These four things will

help us answer the question: "Who is Jesus for?" As we look at that today, we will also talk a little bit about our church - the Church at Perry Creek - and talk about who our church is for!

Here's my prayer for us today: I would love it if some of you that are visiting today would begin to ask yourselves if the Church at Perry Creek might be the church for you. I would love it even more if each and every one of us would decide that Jesus was for us! That he was really for us - no matter who we are or where we come from. That's what we are going to see in the passage, and that's my prayer for us today. So let's read John 12:12-36.

As we prepare to read this, let me just give you the background to the story, so that we understand what is happening as we read. This story happens just five days before Jesus' death on the cross. This is just before the Jewish holiday of Passover - the biggest religious festival of Israel's year. All Jewish males were supposed to go to Jerusalem to observe Passover, so there are large crowds. As Jesus and his disciples travelled to Jerusalem, they had stopped in a little town called Bethany, just a couple of miles from Jerusalem. And there, Jesus raised a man named Lazarus from the grave.

As you can imagine, this caused quite a stir. So in the passage we are going to look at today, John (the writer) not only explains how that helped bring about the Triumphal Entry, but he also explains how it was that the crowd - that was so excited about Jesus on Palm Sunday - could turn on him in less than a week. Because they will. Some of those that are cheering him on will crucify him in less than a week, and this passage is the turning point. So let's read John 12:12-36:

The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the King of Israel!"

Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees (Jesus' religious opponents) said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world

will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.” The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

The crowd spoke up, “We have heard from the Law (the Old Testament) that the Christ will remain forever, so how can you say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this ‘Son of Man’?”

Then Jesus told them, “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.” When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them.

- John 12:12-36

This is an amazing story about Jesus. It has all kinds of theological and historical truths that I would love to explore. Today we are just going to look at these four very basic truths that we see about Jesus here - that in the end will get back to the question “Who is Jesus for?” The first truth that we see in this passage is this:

Jesus is the Star of the show

As our story opens, two large crowds come together. The crowd that saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead has followed him down that two mile stretch of road from Bethany to Jerusalem. Now as they near Jerusalem, they run into a giant crowd that had come to Jerusalem for Passover. John tells us that as the two crowds mingled. The Lazarus crowd began to testify to the Passover Crowd, telling them how Jesus had raised someone from the dead.

As they did that, something amazing happened: Jesus became the star of the show. Everyone began to acknowledge in their own way that Jesus was the Messiah-King of Israel that had been predicted again and again in the Old Testament. The disciples for their part already knew it. They had a basic understanding that Jesus was the Messiah. That's why they followed him.

The crowd now suddenly realized it, and they went wild. They were tired of the oppression of the Romans. They were ready for Israel to have its own mighty king. When they heard that they had a miracle worker on their hands, they knew just what to do: They cut down Palm branches, which had always been waved as a sign of military victory. They began shouting phrases from Psalms 118 - one of the Old Testament songs that they would sing at Passover, that talks about military victory over foreign nations. They began shouting at Jesus "Hosheana - 'Save now'." They were asking for Jesus to start an insurrection and overthrow Rome.

Even Jesus got into the act, but he did it in a very different way. The crowd was acting out Psalms 118 - a very military prophecy about the King destroying Gentiles and powerfully entering Jerusalem. Jesus acts out a very different prophecy. This one is from the book of Zechariah, and it was about a very different aspect of the Messiah's rule. Zechariah talks about how gentle, and meek and humble the Messiah will be. In fact, it pictures him riding on a donkey.

Now if you've grown up in America - and especially in the city - you've probably never seen anyone actually ride a donkey before. Chances are, in your mind, you see Jesus riding on a slightly smaller version of a horse - not quite as large, but with its own rural elegance. We spent nearly ten years in Africa. We've seen our share of people riding donkeys, and let me just say there's nothing elegant about it! They're short - they're stubborn - and they have this choppy, bouncy gait. It's like trying to ride a tricycle when you're 6' tall. There is no way to look cool while you're riding a donkey. That's why it was a sign of humility!

Jesus is acting out Messianic prophecies. The crowd is acting them out. The disciples are acknowledging him as Messiah. Jesus is the star of the show. In fact, even the Pharisees - Jesus' religious opponents - recognize that Jesus is the star of the show. They say "Look the whole world is gone after him!" I'm sure it seemed that way. When John talks about a crowd, he's not talking about 60 or 70 people. There could be by some estimates as many as 2.7 million people in Jerusalem for Passover. So, don't picture a Jesus movie. Picture Franklin Street in Chapel Hill on Monday night after winning the NCAA basketball championship. At this moment, everyone from the Disciples - to the crowd - to the Pharisees - to Jesus himself - is acknowledging that He is the star of the show.

He should be. Jesus was - and is - and will be - the predicted Messianic King. Everything that was prophesied about him - from his lineage - to the place and manner of his birth - to his obedience to God and love for people - to the tiny little details of his death - to his resurrection - to his judging and ruling the earth - everything prophesied about him either has come or will come true. As Jesus he rides through a crowd of thousands upon thousands praising him, he's not receiving his due reward - not even close. He's due so much more. He's the star of the show.

One thing that I hope each and every one of you who are visiting our church would find is that Jesus is the star of the show here at The Church at Perry Creek. Any goodness that you find here is not because of our planning or because of our vision or giftedness. Any goodness you find here is because of Jesus. He has changed our lives. He's brought dead marriages back to life. He has redirected some of us when we were living selfish, miserable lives. He's taught people in this congregation how to forgive unspeakable things. He has completely changed the way we calculate the wins and losses in our life. We owe him all our praise. So when we gather here at Perry Creek, we're not just here to perform some religious ceremonies. We're not here to get a few moral principles to live by. We're here to get more of the love, and forgiveness and grace that we have found in Jesus and share it with each other and our neighbors. Jesus is the star of the show. That's the first truth about Jesus in this passage.

Jesus Is For Everybody

We may not notice this: when we first look at the story, you have to look closely but one of the main points that this story is making is that Jesus is for everybody. That fact is all over this story. Now, to understand this we have to understand that to this point in Jesus' ministry he's not been for everybody. Rather, he's been all about Israel. Jesus was a Jew. His disciples were Jewish. The people he ministered to were Jewish. In fact, at one point in his ministry, Jesus specifically said "God has not sent me to the Gentiles, but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." So to this point, it's been all about Israel, but that's about to change. In this passage, he becomes everybody's Jesus.

In verse 19, you may remember that just as the crowd gathered, the Pharisees make an ironic statement: The Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" Now, they don't mean that literally - ethnically - they don't mean that the nations of the world are coming to Jesus. They're just talking about the size of the crowd. They're saying it seems like the whole world is following him! God has a sense of humor. He meant that statement in a different way. He's saying "You bet!" look at what happens as soon as they say that:

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.
- John 12:12-36

John tells us that there were some Greeks at the feast. They come to Phillip, who has a Greek name, and ask to see Jesus. Now look at Jesus' response. This is very important.

Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."
- John 12:23

Now as we read this today, that statement might not seem very important. If we had been reading John's gospel from the beginning, it would jump out at us. Because Jesus has said again and again in John's gospel that his hour has not come. That's what he said to his mother when he turned the water into wine "my hour has not yet come." He said it to the woman at the well in chapter 4 And two times in chapters 7 and 9 when the Pharisees tried to arrest him, John tells us that they couldn't for one reason: his hour had not yet come.

But now suddenly, Jesus says his hour - the hour of his glory - the hour of his sacrifice - has come. So why would Jesus say that? What was it about this current circumstance that signaled Jesus that it was OK for him to be crucified, and resurrected, and to leave and go back to heaven - because that's what this hour means. What signals him that the time has come? One thing: The fact that Gentiles - non-Jews - have followed after him. See, that was the signal, because Jesus' mission on earth isn't finished until he's become everybody's Jesus.

He really does want the whole world to follow after him. Jesus is for everybody! It's all over this passage. Not only do the Pharisees unwittingly prophesy that the whole world will follow him - not only does Jesus say this is what marks the hour - but look at what Jesus says in verse 32: *"But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."*

By that he means all kinds of people - from Jews - to Romans - to Greeks - to Africans. He's Everybody's Jesus. The disciples would have understood this, if they would have thought about what Jesus was doing when he rode on the donkey. Because Zechariah 9 - the Old Testament passage he was acting out - goes on to say that the Messiah would speak peace to the nations - that he would rule from sea to sea, and to the ends of the earth. Jesus is for everybody!

That's one of the main things we would want you to know about Jesus and about our church: He's for everybody. He's for all people. Some people think that Jesus is only for white, blue-eyed, middle-class westerners, which is funny because Jesus was none of those things! He's for all people!

We see this in the church. If you read in the New Testament, the story of the first church starting right after Jesus returned to heaven - the very first miracle God does as the church is starting - is enable the disciples to preach about Jesus in all kinds of languages that they didn't even know, so that people of all kinds could hear about him. It was God's way of saying "Jesus is not just for Jews. He's for everybody." That has held true as the church has grown.

One of the unique things about Christianity is the only major religion that has moved its power center from one culture to another over history. When Christianity first started, it was centered in Jerusalem - then it moved its center to North Africa - then to Europe - then to the Americas. Now some scholars think the center of Christianity has begun to move to Asia. It's like everybody gets their turn, because Jesus is for everybody.

We see this when we think about Palm Sunday. We celebrate Palm Sunday as a church today with a few Palms and children, but the Bible tells us there's a much bigger Palm Sunday celebration coming up. Listen to Revelation 7:9-10. Here's how they are going to celebrate Palm Sunday in heaven. Notice who's there:

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." - Revelation 7:9-10

In the original Palm Sunday, the Jews were saying "Save now -" but in Heaven, every nation, tribe, people and language are saying "Salvation already belongs to Jesus"

Because Jesus is for everybody - no matter their culture or ethnicity. We believe that here.

That's why 25% of everything we take in here at Perry Creek goes to missions - to helping others and sharing the story of Jesus with them.

It's not just that Jesus is for all kinds of ethnicities. He's for all kinds of people. Jesus is for everybody, no matter who they are. He came for all people. If you look at Jesus' ministry, he did minister at times to the rich but Jesus also reached out to people that no one else would touch - poor people, sick people, people who were despised. Jesus did minister to men, but in a male-dominated society, he also treated women - all women - with complete respect. He invited them to follow him. He wasn't just for men. Although Jesus did reach some of Israel's religious leaders, Jesus didn't just go to the religious people. He didn't just go to the people that were morally pure. He was actually called a friend of prostitutes and sinners. So that Jesus is not just for the Jewish - not just for the pretty people - not just for the rich - not just for the poor. He's everybody's Jesus.

We do something here at Perry Creek every Sunday called "I believe in Jesus because - " Today we did it with the kids, so it was short. It's just a time when people from our church stand up and share why they believe in Jesus. It's really cool. We hear from all sorts - people raised in church, and people who never went to church - people who know the right churchy words to say, and people who don't - people whose story has a nice bow on it, and people who are still in the middle of a messy, confusing story. Do you know why we do that? Because Jesus is for everybody.

The most important thing for you to know, if you're here today, is not that Jesus is for everybody. It's for you to know that he's for you. It doesn't matter who you are. Doesn't matter if you feel like one of the beautiful people or not - doesn't matter if you're religious - it doesn't matter whether you have your life morally together or not - Jesus is for you. That brings me to my third point:

Jesus Brings Life From Death

When we read this story, Jesus does something that is very confusing. To this point, everything we've seen kind of makes sense. The disciples and Crowd are really celebrating Jesus. They've got the Palm leaves out. They've struck up the Messianic Band. They are probably jumping over bonfires, like they do in Chapel Hill. Everybody's happy! Then some Greeks ask to see him, and it's even better! Now the whole world really is coming after him. He says the hour - the special hour - the hour of his glorification has come. It all makes sense.

But then Jesus does something that shocks everyone: He starts talking about death. Look at what Jesus say in verse 24 right after he says "The hour has come for him to be glorified.,"

I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

- John 12:24-25

Then look down at verse 27: *"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"*

Then skip down to verse 31: *Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."*

And we might think that Jesus is referring here, to him being exalted or praised - "lifted up" in honor or reverence - but look at verse 33: He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

Crucifixion was invented by people who worshipped the earth. It was invented to lift criminals up from the earth, so they didn't pollute the ground. Jesus is saying that he will draw all people to himself, but it will be at the moment of his death. We wonder what on earth is going on! What is this about a seed dying? What is this about your soul being troubled, Jesus? I thought this was the moment of your glory. What is this about being crucified?

It's confusing, and the crowd sees this. In fact, this is the turning point for many of them. This is the moment they turn against Jesus. They say "We thought that the Messiah was going to live forever. Why are you talking about being lifted up? Nobody wants to follow a dead insurrectionist, so some of them begin to leave.

Now, what's going on here? Why is Jesus talking about death in his moment of triumph? Because Jesus knows something that the crowd - and the Pharisees - and even the disciples at this point - don't. He knows that it is God's way to bring life from death. It is God's way to bring life from death. It is his way to bring healing from brokenness - to bring victory from failure. That's why Jesus says a seed only reproduces life if it dies to itself. That's why he says the person who loses his life will find it for eternal life. It is God's way to bring life from death.

Please hear me: Maybe some of you are here today - and on some level - in some part of your life - you are dealing with death. Maybe it's the death of your marriage - maybe there were wounds - you've grown apart - it's dying - and you don't know how to stop it. Maybe you are watching your child head toward death - or your relationship with your child is dying. Maybe you've received a medical diagnosis - and you're very concerned - maybe life right now just isn't life. It may be sudden. It may be slow. It may be pretty on the outside or ugly on the outside, but you are dealing with death, and you're wondering what you are going to do.

Can I tell you something? You are surrounded today by people who have seen Jesus bring life from death - in their marriages - in their relationships - in their bodies - in their jobs - in their lives. It's his specialty! One of our dearest members - one of the most joyful, life-filled people that I have ever met is a lady named Obbie Clemmons. She is so alive! If you know Obbie's story - she had to deal with the death of her son. Someone took his life, and it almost crushed Obbie. But out of that, Jesus brought a forgiveness - and a joy - and life - that is amazing! Jesus can do that for you. He specializes in bringing life from death.

But here's the thing and please understand this: this is the central, underlying message of all Christianity. Many people go to church their whole lives and never understand this: The primary means by which Jesus brings us life is through his death. His death brings us life.

There are ways in which I don't fully understand the depth of that, but it is the central message of Christianity. Jesus came to earth as one of us, and he lived the life that I should have lived. He lived a life of perfect obedience to the Father, and a life of total love for his fellow man for everybody. He was sinless. He was everything that we should have been.

But he was executed like the worst of sinners. The Romans punished him as a common criminal. But worse than that, the Bible actually says that God the Father poured out on Jesus all the wrath - all the punishment - for our sin, so that Jesus took on him my sin and the death that I deserved.

He gave me his resurrection life, so that I could be alive to God and that I could be made sinless in heaven. Jesus brings me life - through his death - and that's the offer that he makes to all of us. That's the reason that Jesus said "If a seed falls to the ground and dies, it will bring many seeds to life."

That's the central message of Christianity. That's what we celebrate this week, as we move from Palm Sunday, to Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. That's the most important thing that we believe in at the Church of Perry Creek. It's for everybody - no matter who you are - no matter what your background - your ethnicity - no matter how religious you have been. It's for everyone. Jesus brings life from death. Now one last thing:

Jesus Calls For A Response

The crowd has recognized Jesus' claim as Messiah. Jesus has shown that he is for everyone. He has mentioned to them that the direction he is headed is toward death. Now there's a decision to be made. Some are leaving him. Some are still following him. Many are wondering what to do, so Jesus call for a response. Look at what he says:

Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. And now Jesus tells them the response he is looking for - Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light." When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them.

- John 12:35-36

The last thing we see about Jesus is the response he is looking for, and it can be summed up in one word: Trust. That's what Jesus wants. He doesn't want a religious ceremony - that's why it doesn't matter how religious you are. He doesn't want us to be pretty on the outside - that's why it doesn't matter what social class you are. He doesn't want us to impress him with our morality. What he wants - the way that we receive his life in our death - is simply for us to trust him.

That's all we have to do. Just believe that Jesus was who he said he was - God's Son, the Messiah - and that because he died in our place, he truly can give us the life he offers. All we have to do is trust Jesus. If you have any questions, I would be glad to talk to you more about that after our service.

If you're visiting with us today, we hope you've had a good time. We hope you like our church. We hope you felt welcome here. We hope you'll return for our community event this evening. But more than anything else, we hope with all our hearts that you will find Jesus at our church - find him to be the Star of the Show - find him to be for you - find in him the life he offers through faith.